



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

St. Patrick's Day in Alexandria

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This year's absence of St. Patrick's Day festivities in Alexandria is due to circumstances few of us could have foreseen. A look through newspaper archives shows that while there have been many St. Patrick's Day celebrations through the years, there have been other years without celebrations in Alexandria.

Despite the role of John Fitzgerald in our city's early history, St. Patrick's Day was not celebrated in 1876. Instead, the Alexandria Gazette reported, "about twenty members of the Alexandria Commandery of the Knights of St. Patrick went on the 8 o'clock train this morning to Washington to take part in the celebration there." March 17, 1878 also passed without a city celebration, while "a number of people from this city went to Washington this evening to witness the grand parade of the Irish Societies there."

In 1917, St. Patrick's Day was celebrated, but not universally in Alexandria. Just one year after the Easter Rising, the students and teachers of St. Mary's Academy held a spirited celebration, which emphasized not only Irish songs and culture, but as one of the teachers claimed, "when America calls for defenders, every son of St. Patrick will say, 'Right here.'"

The intersection of Irish and American patriotism was not new. As early as 1824, a Hibernian Society was founded in Alexandria with the purpose of helping impoverished immigrants from Ireland and to maintain Irish identity in the New World. Posts by the group frequently connected the American fight for independence in the 18th century with the Irish fight in the 19th century which was still ongoing.

It was the Hibernian Society which led the 1836 St. Patrick's Day Parade in our town, described at the time as a: "Procession from the room over the Hydraulions, a (firehouse) down Royal Street, each of the members bearing on his breast, one of the badges which had been made for the occasion by some of the ladies of Alexandria ..."

The celebration had been revived by 1921, as the Gazette reported that the Catholic Club would celebrate St. Patrick's Day in the Lyceum. The paper noted that, "The entertainment has been deferred until 9 o'clock, after the parade."

With the interruption of daily life in Alexandria this year, we hope that a reminder of old traditions encourages the creation of new ones for the future.

"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria.



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